

Documents on Diplomacy: Resources

Briefing Memo VII: Diplomacy and the Great War

As the summer of 1914 approached, Americans looked forward to the opening of the Panama Canal, a full two years ahead of schedule. But the assassination of an Austrian prince in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914, changed everything. By the time the canal opened on August 15, 1914, Europe was engulfed in war. For the next 2 ½ years, the diplomacy of the United States would focus on preserving neutrality and avoiding the war.

President Woodrow Wilson declared U.S. neutrality on August 19, 1914, and asked Americans to remain impartial in thought as well as deed. That was easier said than done. Americans had positive feelings about the Allies because many still acknowledged a debt to France because of its support during the American Revolution. In contrast, the German-American relationship was a cool one, even though many Americans claimed German descent. Thirty years of conflict over German imperialism in the Pacific led Americans to see the Germans as dangerous global aggressors.

Starvation in Belgium

That image was reinforced when the German army immediately occupied the small neutral nation of Belgium. American diplomats with the assistance of a talented, young American engineer, Herbert Hoover, worked desperately to feed the Belgians—a job they would continue to shoulder for the rest of the war.

The war took a tremendous toll on both sides. In March 1917, domestic political discontent combined with the hardship of war caused open revolt inside of Russia—the key Allied power on Germany's eastern front. Americans diplomats on scene were impressed by the orderly change sweeping the country and urged Washington to be the first to recognize the new government. But the Russian Revolution was far from complete and continued on an increasingly dark and radical course. While some urged the United States to intervene, Americans announced that their actions were limited and not designed to change the revolutionary dynamic.

In early 1917, British intelligence passed a message to the United States, warning against great danger. In the famous Zimmerman Telegram, the German foreign minister instructed his ambassador in Mexico City to offer the Mexicans parts of the southwestern United States in exchange for an alliance. That threat combined with increased German submarine warfare, led to a declaration of war on April 2, 1917.

The Germans were gambling that the United States couldn't mobilize a large army quickly, couldn't transport it overseas, and couldn't feed it and the civilian population, once the army arrived. The situation became even more desperate in 1917, but Wilson bet on Hoover. Once American forces arrived, it was a matter of time until the Germans and their allies would be defeated.

Wilson's Ideas for Peace

President Wilson used that time to envision the components of the peace. Wilson believed that a League of Nations was essential to building a lasting peace and insisted that the League be included in the peace treaty, but his political opponents wanted to follow America's traditional course and avoid "entangling alliances." They wanted to vote on the peace treaty first and then vote on a League.

A furious political debate swept the United States. Wilson traveled the country delivering passionate appeals in support of the League, but the Senate was unmoved and the "reservations" of Senator Henry Cabot Lodge to the peace treaty doomed it—and the League of Nations—to defeat. Despite Wilson's efforts, the United States would not be a member of the League of Nations.

Disaster loomed, as a prominent economist warned. The war was over, but the United States had turned its back on the rebuilding of Europe—and on the future. The war was over, but the United States had turned its back on the rebuilding of Europe—and on the future. ■